Perceptions and pedagogic approaches in English and Putonghua: The case of business communication

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INTRODUCTION

English has long been regarded the international language of business. However, with more and more people seeking employment in the Chinese business world, ‘Business Chinese’ is also becoming increasingly important. This is especially true in post-colonial Hong Kong, where many business people readily embrace the need to communicate well, particularly in spoken Chinese. This study aims to explore two central questions as they relate to teachers and learners of Business Communication in both English and Putonghua at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology:

1. How do Hong Kong students perceive the study of English and Putonghua with regard to Business Communication courses?
2. What types of classroom activities do they prefer when taking these classes?

Business English and Business Putonghua

While it may be difficult to define Business English in linguistic terms, Pickett (discussed in Dudley-Evans & St. John 1998:54) notes that business communication is multi-faceted, with some of it being ‘nearer the everyday language spoken by the general public than other segments of ESP’, as represented by the following diagram:

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general English
↓
communication with the public
↓
Business English
↓
communication among businesses
↓
specialised language for particular businesses
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As Dudley-Evans and St John (ibid.) note, the diagram highlights two aspects of business communication, namely, ‘communication with the public and communication within (intra) a company or between (inter) companies.’

The notions of English for General Business Purposes (EGBP) and English for Specific Business Purposes (ESBP), are also described by Dudley-Evans and St John (op. cit.:55–6):

English for General Business Purposes courses are usually for pre-experience learners or those at the very early stages of their career. They are similar to general EFL courses with the materials set in business contexts.

English for Specific Business Purposes courses are run for job-experienced learners who bring business knowledge and skills to the language-learning situation … the courses focus on one or two language skills and specific business communicative events.

While the focus of EGBP is to teach a range of English through business settings, ESBP is an approach that leads to a more sophisticated use of language - a ‘deep-end’ approach which often starts from a fluency activity, progresses to language and skills work contributing to the outcome, and subsequently leads to further fluency practice. The settings for such activities are generally taken from the learners’ own experiences as well as business contexts.

It seems that less has been written on the study of Business Chinese as a language course. While Zhang (1997) lists a variety of Business Chinese courses in terms of course structure and length of the course, Chen (1998) suggests that there are a variety of Business Putonghua courses, the contents of which range from language courses ‘containing a certain amount of business-relevant elements, such as business jargon, knowledge about China and Chinese culture, and Chinese business etiquette’, to business courses which are ‘conducted in the Chinese language, requiring the use of the Chinese language in business contexts’ (ibid.:4). Hence, the actual practice of Business Chinese instruction, as Chen suggests, can be seen as a ‘continuum with its two poles as Chinese and Business’ (ibid.):

Any point in the continuum represents a unique combination of language foundation and business application, and has a legitimate status if it satisfies the need of a specific group of learners.
Most Business Putonghua courses are scattered around the middle of the Chinese–Business continuum. They differ from generic Chinese courses in that they focus on the application of Chinese for business purposes, whereas generic courses are less practical and purposeful in nature. Learners of Business Putonghua, nonetheless, aim at expanding their communication abilities, and, like students of Business English, seek employment or work-related opportunities in the business community of the target language.

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

**Questionnaire**

A questionnaire was designed to investigate students’ attitudes toward Business English and Business Putonghua. It consisted of seven questions: five were open-ended and two had a list of options to choose from. The open-ended questions were used to allow for various responses, and to examine more closely students’ views on language learning. Options were given where the respondents could focus on a set of specific responses.

**Samples and data collection**

The questionnaire was distributed to 83 second-year Business students at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, 47 of whom were from the second year English Business Communication class and 36 from the Advanced Business Putonghua class. The English Business Communication course is a compulsory course for all students of the School of Business and Management at the University, whereas those who study Advanced Business Putonghua take the course voluntarily. It should also be noted, however, that all of the Putonghua respondents took Putonghua during their first year of university study, as they were required to study an Elementary Business Putonghua course which lasted for fifteen weeks (45 contact hours). In this regard, the backgrounds of the two groups of respondents were comparable – all of them had had a considerable amount of past experience in learning the target language.

Simple frequency counts were used to analyse the data collected, as the main purpose of the present study is to use this as a basis for pedagogical decision-making and not to measure relationships between survey items.
FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Question 1 asked the students to state their reason(s) for studying Business English or Business Putonghua (that is, other than the fact that it may be a compulsory subject). Students’ answers are summarised and presented in Tables 1a and 1b. (Note that as most of the respondents provided more than one reason, percentages do not add up to 100%).

Table 1a: Reasons for studying Business English.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Useful for future career</td>
<td>98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Useful for studies</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To interact with English-speaking people</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others (e.g. raising self-confidence in speaking English)</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1b: Reasons for studying Business Putonghua.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Useful for future career</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To interact with Putonghua-speaking people</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important in the business world</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others (e.g. being Chinese, more comfortable using it, more confidence speaking Putonghua)</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1a shows that students’ motivation for learning Business English is primarily instrumental rather than integrative (terms first used by Gardner & Lambert 1972). In total, 98% of the respondents state that they study English because they believe that they need the communication skills for future work; and they believe they will have better career prospects if they are more proficient in English. 13% of the respondents state that English is a practical subject which helps with their studies, while only 4% indicate that they are studying it because they want to communicate with English-speaking people. Not surprisingly, these findings correspond favourably with other studies that have also examined Asian students’ attitudes to learning English (e.g. Lukmani 1972; Lai 1996; Yu et al. 1996a, 1996b). Most of these studies, consistently report that Asian students regard English as ‘the key to job success’, and few associate English with fun or personal interest.

The majority of students learning Business Putonghua think the language is important in the Chinese business world and that it is also important for future career prospects (61%). A significant number of them also think that Putonghua is interesting and believe they will need to use it in their daily lives (41%).
Students also provided ‘other’ reasons for learning the language; for example, they want to communicate more effectively with other Chinese-speaking people. A few respondents even stated that by virtue of their ethnicity, they should know how to speak Putonghua as it is the language of the ‘motherland’. One student even related learning Putonghua to ‘the return of Hong Kong to the motherland’. This fact, of course, points toward some very interesting ways in which Hong Kong Chinese students are currently exploring the notion of their ‘identity.’

With regard to Question 2, students of Business English and Business Putonghua were asked in which oral activities they most enjoyed participating (see Figures 1a and b below). The responses from both groups indicated similar patterns of preferences. Among the list of choices, the three most popular oral activities are oral presentations, small-group discussions and role-play/simulation. Interviews and debates appear to be the least favoured activities, whereas answering teachers’ questions, which is often perceived as an integral part of the language class by teachers, is not seen as a preferred oral activity by either group of respondents. One possible reason for this is that students lack confidence in their language proficiency. This is also reflected by some learners during informal discussions. One student said that when he speaks English, he has ‘a strong concern’ to speak it well, while another said that he feels anxious when speaking up in the event of ‘making a fool of himself’. This may reflect the Chinese cultural concept of ‘losing face’ or appearing silly or foolish in front of others (Bond 1991); or as Yu et al. (1996a) suggest, students’ affective reactions to speaking English may depend heavily on their self-perceptions. This means that even if students can perform well in front of others, they may not evaluate themselves positively.

![Preferences for different oral activities among students of English](image-url)
When asked, in Question 3, whether they would prefer using English or Putonghua to make a formal oral presentation, the majority of the English group (64%) and the Putonghua group (53%) indicated that they prefer using English to Putonghua. Although they are learning Putonghua at an advanced level, and the course itself is chosen on a voluntary basis, only a minority of the Putonghua students (33%) would choose to use the language to make an oral presentation, with five students (14%) indicating that they do not mind using either language.

When asked why they would prefer using English to Putonghua in oral presentations, the majority of respondents again demonstrated a pragmatic view of English use, as shown in Table 2. Apart from foreseeing a possible need for giving English oral presentations in their future careers, students seem to demonstrate a sense of familiarity and ease when using English.
The fact that students would choose to use English in formal presentations and for business conversations but not for general group discussions reveals how they perceive the status of English in society – it continues to be the ‘formal’ language used in academic and business contexts. The implication of this could be that students do not regard learning English a threat to their cultural identity and that English has acquired a less culture-specific status (Yu et al. 1996b). This fact reaffirms what many scholars today are calling the ‘globalisation of English’ (Kachru 1982; Pennycook 1994).

Table 2: Reasons for preferring use of English in oral presentations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Students of Business English</th>
<th>Students of Business Putonghua</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Familiar with giving oral presentations in English</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More likely to use it in the future</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have learned it for many years</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparatively weak at Putonghua</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English being ‘the’ language for presentations</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While oral presentations are made to an audience, group discussions are often carried out among a few participants, making the group discussion less formal and less ‘stressful’ in terms of language use. To find out more about how students feel when using English and Putonghua in different contexts, Question 4 looked at students’ preferences when using English and Putonghua in class discussions.

Contrary to the results of Question 3, students seem to be moving away from English to Putonghua. While most of the students preferred to use English for formal presentations, fewer students (40% English and 25% Putonghua) prefer to use English for group discussions. In fact, more students (45% English) preferred to speak Putonghua. This is particularly true for respondents from the Putonghua group (53%). Table 3 below illustrates some of the reasons offered by students.

Table 3: Reasons for preferring Putonghua in group discussions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Students of Business English</th>
<th>Students of Business Putonghua</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Similar to Cantonese</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valuable chance to practise</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A common theme can be discerned when summarising reasons for the Putonghua preference: our local students have positive feelings toward Putonghua – it is interesting and easy to learn. Although no details were given, it is not difficult to explain this since Putonghua and Cantonese have phonological, syntactical and morphological similarities. One can, therefore, also assume that students, in general, have a positive perception of their Putonghua competence.

Reasons provided by students as to why they prefer using Putonghua for group discussions reflect their relatively positive self-perceptions about their Putonghua competence. Most of them believe that Putonghua is easier to learn and is a less demanding language to use. As one of the respondents put it, “Putonghua is easier [than English] because people in general have a low expectation of Putonghua accuracy”. This is why for small group discussions, she prefers Putonghua to English because she can then “speak more relaxingly” [sic].

In Question 5, students were asked whether they prefer using English or Putonghua in a business context. Answers to this question were remarkably similar to those found to Question 3, where the majority of students (63% of English, 44% of Putonghua) indicated that they preferred using English to Putonghua in a business conversation.

Among the various reasons given, the following examples were typical:

‘English is traditionally regarded as the language of the business world.’

‘[English] is a more common language in the social context.’

‘English is an international language.’

‘Hong Kong is an international society and people of Hong Kong are used to speaking in English [in the workplace].’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>Putonghua</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Easy to express ideas</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More comfortable using it</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easier to use it</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easy to communicate</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More interesting</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When considering Hong Kong's reversion to Chinese rule, and the ensuing changes in the local political arena, one might surmise that the status of English in the Special Administrative Region might be affected. On the contrary, however, respondents in the present study still seem to regard English as the most 'important' language in the workplace. Putonghua, however, is preferable when participating in interactions in contexts such as group discussions.

Students were asked in Question 6 to predict how much English and Putonghua they will need to use in their future careers. They were asked to choose from a scale ranging from 'a lot' to 'a little'. Not surprisingly, respondents in general thought that English would be used much more than Putonghua (more than 70% in both groups) in their future careers.

The last question asked students about the language(s) they would most likely pursue after graduation and why. In total, 36% of the English group indicated that they would take English courses while 43% of them would choose Putonghua after graduation. For respondents of the Putonghua group, preferences are equally divided (30% English and 31% Putonghua). It is interesting to note that in both groups of respondents, only a small number (15% English, 14% Putonghua) think both English and Putonghua are important. While reasons for their choices vary, comments such as those given below might provide us with insights into how students perceive the two languages:

'English, because it is more useful in the business world.'

'English, since English is more important than Putonghua. Putonghua is also less demanding. If you can use it for general communication, then it's enough.'

'English. Its status is higher.'

'Putonghua. It's more interesting and it's warming.'

'Putonghua, because I've learnt it for less than 3 years but have learnt English for more than 10 years.'

'Putonghua, because the need and demand for Putonghua is becoming higher and higher in the working environment.'

'Putonghua, because my English is fluent but I need to learn Putonghua from scratch.'
'I think both languages will be equally important.'

CONCLUSION

This study points out that more extensive needs analyses should be conducted in order to provide a more accurate picture of language needs in the post-1997 Hong Kong workplace. In addition, employers should be given opportunities to suggest ways in which tertiary institutions can best train students so that they might fulfil the language demands placed upon them in their future careers. By gaining a better understanding of the ‘end-users’ who employ university graduates, language teachers can better equip their students for the ever-increasing linguistic demands placed upon them in the workplace. In the special case of Hong Kong, therefore, it is becoming more and more apparent that English and Putonghua should be viewed by Hong Kong language teachers and students, not in opposition to one another, but rather, as complementary.
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References

______ 1996b. Hong Kong tertiary students' attitudes and proficiency in spoken English. RELC Journal 27, 1, 70-88.